

New People for a New World: From Settlement to the New Nation

The discovery of the New World in the late fifteenth century caused one of the greatest folk migrations in history. The New World has acted as a “distant magnet,” attracting millions from the Old World. Indeed, the migration, though slowed from time to time, has never stopped, and it continues to this day. Immigration has been a constant factor in American history from 1607 to the present—and a source of controversy as well.

The Spanish came first to the New World and established a great and highly profitable empire in the early sixteenth century. The French, English, and Dutch arrived about a century later. Spanish influence, however, did not extend very far into North America. Here the English and the French emerged as the chief competitors. The English settled the Atlantic seaboard and the French settled in Canada and the trans-Appalachian west. The Dutch of New Netherlands (later New York) were defeated by the English in the 1660s. The French and the English, though not initially direct competitors, watched one another suspiciously. The English eventually emerged in firm control of the Atlantic seaboard from New England to Georgia. After their victory in the French and Indian War (1756-1763), they eliminated French power in North America.

All Europeans, but particularly the Spanish, brought diseases with them to which Native Americans had never been exposed. Consequently, the Native American population was dramatically reduced. This tragic, though unintentional, calamity made European conquest easier than would have otherwise been possible. But there were also other factors more particularly applicable to the English. In the early seventeenth century, England had a large pool of potential emigrants; religious tensions and economic difficulties helped motivate many people to seek greater opportunity in America. Although the first English colony was Virginia (1607), it was in New England that immigrants first arrived in large numbers. The English Puritans, hard pressed by a hostile King and an established church, embarked upon a "Great Migration." Between 1620 (the founding of Plymouth) and 1642 (the English Civil War) over 80,000 people emigrated to America (two percent of the population); most came to New England.

Several other characteristics of the English settlement patterns contributed to the growth of the English colonies. The English government in the early seventeenth century encouraged emigration, seeing the New World colonies as a kind of social safety valve. Unlike the Spanish and the French, significant numbers of English families settled in America. By contrast, only about ten thousand people emigrated to French Canada between 1608 and 1760. The French and Spanish empires were built largely by single men. So from the outset the English

colonies were characterized by a density of population not seen elsewhere in the New World.

All the American colonies were characterized by varying degrees of government control. Mercantilism, the prevailing economic philosophy of the time, advocated strict government regulation of national economies. The French and the Spanish colonies were rigidly controlled by their respective governments. The English, though also mercantilists, permitted greater flexibility both in the types of colonies and in the degree of private enterprise permitted. The result was that the English colonies grew and flourished in the seventeenth century. Beginning in the middle of the century, however, migration from England slowed significantly.

The restoration of the English monarchy in 1660 brought the era of Puritan dominance to an end; nevertheless, Puritans and other dissenting Protestants enjoyed a much greater degree of toleration, particularly after the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688. The age of great Puritan emigration ended. At the same time, the English began to fear the loss of population, a fear which was aggravated by the plague and the great fire of London in the 1660s. Even so, the growth of the English colonies continued with the acquisition of New York in 1664 and the founding of the Carolinas in the 1660s and Pennsylvania in 1682.

The impact of anti-emigration sentiment in England, however, was reduced in a way which profoundly affected the history of the North

American British colonies and, later, of the United States. The lessening of English emigration was offset by a surge in non-English emigration.

The Dutch New Netherlands had welcomed settlers from many parts of Europe. New York, which replaced New Netherlands, continued this policy. Increasingly, non-English people—primarily Germans, Scots, and Ulster Scots (Scots-Irish) and some French—came to North America.

These emigrants did not seek out homes in all the colonies with equal intensity. New England remained strongly English and, despite a general weakening of Puritan influence, did not welcome different ethnic groups or different faiths. Also, these immigrants did not seek out the emerging plantation colonies of the South. Instead, they favored New York and the Middle Colonies, particularly Pennsylvania.

The diversity of New York had been fueled by economic considerations. The diversity of Pennsylvania resulted from the deliberate policy of its founder, William Penn. Penn was himself a dissenting Protestant, a Quaker, and he founded Pennsylvania as a place of refuge for Quakers and other groups seeking religious toleration. Over time, Pennsylvania attracted various groups of dissenting German Protestants, beginning in 1683. Even some French Protestants, called Huguenots, came to America after the Edict of Nantes, which had granted them some degree of toleration, was revoked by Louis XIV in 1685. Over one thousand Huguenots settled in Charleston, South Carolina.

This diverse immigration continued, even accelerated, in the eighteenth century. The three immigrant groups which made the greatest contribution to the population of the English North American colonies were the Germans, the Ulster Scots, and the Scots.

An average of two thousand German immigrants a year came to North America during most of the eighteenth century. They excelled in farming and settled in Pennsylvania, New York, and frontier areas of other colonies, though their strongest area of concentration was in central Pennsylvania.

Scottish emigration to North America was fueled by both political and economic discontent. Scotland had been joined to England by the Act of Union in 1708 after centuries of strife. The act was widely resented in Scotland, and Scottish separatism was manifested in rebellions in 1715 and 1745 against the English Hanoverian monarchy. In addition, agricultural reforms displaced farmer workers. Altogether some twenty-five thousand Scots emigrated to America between 1763 and 1775.

The Ulster Scots also came in significant numbers. The Ulster Scots were Scots who had been encouraged by the English government to settle in the Ulster region of northern Ireland in the early seventeenth century. They have been traditionally known as Scots-Irish. The term, however, is misleading because they were actually Scots living in northern Ireland. There was little intermarriage between these Protestant Scots and their Irish Catholic neighbors. A century later, some two

hundred thousand of the six hundred thousand people living in Ulster were Ulster Scots.

As Protestants (Presbyterians) they were better off than their Catholic neighbors, but during the course of the eighteenth century, they became increasingly dissatisfied with their situation. They were taxed to support the established Church of England and were barred from holding public office. Rents on farmland were increasing. English mercantilist policy prohibited them from exporting their wool to England. As a result, thousands of the Ulster Scots sought new opportunities in America. Most of them arrived in Philadelphia and moved west to frontier regions. They came in significant numbers. Between fifty and seventy thousand came before 1770. Economic problems in the 1760s and 1770s led to an even greater surge of emigration. In the five-year span from 1770 to 1775, as many as forty thousand more Ulster Scots came to America.

Another group of immigrants began arriving in America in 1619. This group was distinguished from all other immigrant groups by virtue of race and the circumstances of their arrival. Unlike all other groups, the Africans were involuntary immigrants. Although the great majority of enslaved Africans were sent to the British West Indies, the Sugar Islands, significant numbers also were sent to the mainland colonies. Their primary use was to provide agricultural labor, so they were concentrated in the southern plantation colonies. There were, however, also

concentrations of them in the north as well, particularly in the cities of Philadelphia and New York.

The growing diversity of the colonial population met with relatively little resistance. There were no significant nativist movements in colonial America. There was some resistance in New England and some resentment of both Ulster Scots and Germans. Benjamin Franklin was offended by the clannishness of the “Palatine boors” who, he said, were trying to “Germanize” Pennsylvania. Still, only one group aroused deep-seated opposition. Although Roman Catholics constituted only one percent of the population, and more than half of them lived in one colony, Maryland, they were regarded with deep distrust by the Protestant majority.

Maryland had originally been established as a refuge for Catholics by Cecilius Calvert, the second Lord Baltimore, an English Catholic aristocrat, in 1634. A Protestant majority, however, had taken control by 1653. In fact, Catholics enjoyed little freedom to practice their faith except in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island. Even so, there was generally greater religious toleration in the British colonies than in most places in Europe, and rapid progress in toleration occurred during the Revolutionary and Early National periods of American history.

A few simple statistics can best demonstrate the surprising diversity of America. By 1790, nearly four million people were living in the new nation. Nineteen percent of the population was African America.

On the other hand, less than half (49.2%) of the population was English. The leading immigrant groups were: Germans (7%), Scots (6.6%), and the Ulster Scots (4.8%). Altogether 31.5% of the population consisted of non-English whites.

The foundation of what President Franklin D. Roosevelt called a “nation of immigrants” was laid in America’s colonial era.